

PART IV

Reviewing the Damaging Effects of Ethiopian Diaspora Politics on the Wider Community and its Future Initiatives: The Search for Alternative Mechanisms - Concluding Remarks

By Maru Gubena

Dear readers, as promised when part three was published about three weeks ago, here is the final section of the entire paper (“*Reviewing the Damaging Effects of Ethiopian Diaspora Politics on the Wider Community and its Future Initiatives: The Search for Alternative Mechanisms*”). The title of this important section is “**The Search for Alternative directions and Mechanisms - Concluding Remarks.**” Initially this was to be published together with part three, but for smooth reading and because I would like to direct special attention to the alternatives and remarks it contains, I thought it would be wiser and perhaps more readable to publish them separately. For me this final section is a must-read text, the backbone of the entire paper; I hope that the alternatives suggested and the concluding remarks will receive broad attention, but even more that they will lead to a fruitful discussion. In addition to briefly reviewing and reflecting on all of the sections of the paper as a whole, and the reasons behind the persistent reluctance of Ethiopian Diaspora political movements, their interest groups and supporters to pay attention to repeated proposals to establish a single, united and respected Ethiopian Diaspora House – an institution that functions professionally and embraces all of the segments of the Ethiopian Diaspora community – this final section provides bold and unambiguous alternatives to the current course of Ethiopian Diaspora politics and our political groupings. If our current course continues, the closing remarks envisage a gloomy future, with a painful, disappointing conclusion for those who have even minimal expectations for concrete results from Diaspora politics. A process of recovery can commence and take on the desired shape only if we are willing to redirect the current course of Ethiopian Diaspora politics and bring about a drastic change, moving our mindsets and behaviours from family and group-oriented towards a focus on ourselves as Ethiopians, and on Ethiopians as one community.

The Search for Alternative directions and Mechanisms - Concluding Remarks

Ethiopian Diaspora politics are almost as old as the Ethiopian Diaspora itself, as mentioned in part two of this article. Not surprisingly, however, while a disproportionately high number of the rapidly growing group of Ethiopian Diaspora community members have succeeded in aggressively and progressively advancing in a number of areas, including extraordinary achievements in their education and living standards and taking on huge responsibilities in supporting family members both in Ethiopia and in the Diaspora, our Ethiopian Diaspora politics have never succeeded in receiving their support, or even in attracting their attention. Consequently, Ethiopian Diaspora politics, political organizations, and their individual founders have remained, not just dysfunctional, but also entirely unknown to the large majority of the community. Even those few among the community who have had an opportunity to be familiar with the existence of Ethiopian Diaspora politics and its interest groups accuse the founders of those organizations and their supporters of being the source of persistent tensions, divisions and conflicts within the community, its community-based organizations and church institutions, and thereby preventing resourceful, potentially helpful community organizers with vision – those who are capable of planting seeds of harmony within the community and working towards socio-cultural, political and economic changes in our country – from coming out of their fortresses and contributing to the multiple needs of the community and the country at large. Due to these long-existing, smoldering tensions and anxieties, Ethiopian Diaspora politics have also been

seen by many as a potential obstacle to the establishment, development and functioning of a non-political, professional Ethiopian Diaspora institution (or institutions) – an institution whose founders, employees and volunteers don't and should not aspire to either political power or a political role in Ethiopia and Ethiopian politics. An institution that is conducive to embracing all of the segments of the Ethiopian Diaspora community and its community-based organizations, and capable of changing the current circumstances and mood of the entire community to become harmonious, strong, united and hardworking – hardworking, first of all to achieve unity and confidence building for the community itself. Once this has been accomplished, the attention of the institution and our community resources and energies in general can be directed at the various issues of Ethiopia, including human rights and democratization processes, carrying out networking and professionally established diplomacy and lobbying activities with a collective voice. The tasks and responsibilities of, or if necessary, providing resources to local communities that need to reinforce their existing civil society organizations and establish and strengthen new institutions will be among the many goals and activities of the Ethiopian Diaspora House.

Even though I am clearly aware that, due to my complete openness in writing about what I see is going to happen to us or to our planned activities and goals, or that the road on which we are traveling is a bad and most dangerous one that will not take us to the intended destination, I have been accused, not once but repeatedly, by the then Kinijit supporters of being a “good fortune teller” and “a potential enemy of Kinijit,” for simply having said, in the summer of 2006, that Kinijit was “a thing of the past.” And despite not knowing what might follow, or what the repercussions of the views and arguments I give below might be, it would certainly be wrong of me and would go against my firm beliefs and principles if I failed to share my perspectives about the future directions of Ethiopian Diaspora politics and what exactly needs to be done in the future by the community as an alternative to previous activities and current engagements – perspectives based upon my observations, events that have taken place and my interactions with my readers and the wider Ethiopian community regarding their observations and experiences. In addition to my beliefs and principles, I continue to do my best to contribute my part to the debate and perhaps also to the process of learning from each other. Due to my profound interest, involvement and engagement in research and work about asylum seekers/refugees, including interactions and activities of Ethiopian asylum seekers/refugees and our Diaspora community in general, the history of other Diaspora communities, including the African Diaspora, the “White Russian Refugees,” the émigrés from China, Chile and Argentina, and their roles and contribution to peace and development in their countries of origin. I do this despite the absence of a relatively democratic platform and despite the many unpleasant, hurtful events and disappointments of past and present Diaspora politics, especially since 2005.

It is in this light that I have been reviewing the damaging effects of Ethiopian Diaspora politics on the wider community, our organizational hopes and potential future initiatives, so that we can consider the actions and measures that will be required and perhaps make corrections to some policies and planned activities.

Yes, it seems, at least to me, from my own experiences, observations, assessments and understandings, that the damaging effects of Ethiopian Diaspora politics in the past few years on the morale and interest of the community members in future hopes, socio-political activities and organizational initiatives involving the multiple issues of our country have been huge – incalculable and difficult, if not impossible, to repair or to mend. Even though unstructured and unorganized, some Ethiopians have been spontaneously interested in establishing a collective voice against the TPLF leadership. Their contributions could potentially have supported the process of stabilization, peace and development, and they might have helped to influence and redirect the course of politics in our country; instead, however, a disproportionately high number have already been badly hurt. As we know, the activities that have come from Ethiopian Diaspora politics have always been entirely motivated by a desire to respond to the cruel and inhuman actions and measures undertaken by the TPLF leadership. And unless something dramatic takes place in the land of Ethiopia – something

tragic, politically, comparable to the May 2005 election or even uglier – the task of reversing our current state, or at least reviving a part of the excitement and profound involvement of the Ethiopia Diaspora community to resemble what we witnessed throughout the spring of 2005 and into the early months of 2006, will be almost insurmountable. It will take, at least, two or even three decades, and will require an enormous amount of effort, including dramatic changes in the attitudes and behaviours of each and every member of the Ethiopian Diaspora community towards each other, -finding ways to reconcile even with those whose political views differ from our own. Meanwhile, if the current engagements and activities of Ethiopian Diaspora community politics continue, the damaging impact will undoubtedly increase rapidly, to the point that generations born in 2005 and beyond, feeling its direct and indirect effects, will react to the phrase “Ethiopian politics” with frowning faces, feeling appalled and disgusted.

It would probably be healthy, even wise, to ask whether Ethiopian Diaspora politics alone have been and are the main reason – the cardinal source – of our terrible failure and defeat, which I see as demoralizing and paralyzing us? I would say, “no.” It is not. As suggested by the title of part one of this paper, I personally see Ethiopian Diaspora politics as a factor that contributes to the smoldering tensions, anxieties and divisions among the Diaspora community, but not the only nor even the determining factor for our failure. The first and cardinal reason, which is undeniably true, based on Ethiopians’ experiences, what they have witnessed, and on repeated statements and threats, I would insist unambiguously, is that we Ethiopians don’t like each other and we don’t like our country! In fact I would argue that loving a given country means nothing more than loving and respecting the people themselves and the land in which they live. And if that is true, then the often-heard talk about how deeply and how broadly we love Ethiopia simply consists of endless lies.

Imagine now just for a while, just for a moment, that we, the entire community of the Ethiopian Diaspora, had lived through the remarkable and testing four-year period, from winter 2005 to early 2009, a period marked by an irremovable black stain on the minds of the Ethiopian Diaspora community, on our own island. I will call it Zaldonia. We are there with no rules and laws of our own, just as we are living now. It should not be at all difficult for any member of our community with a healthy common sense who walked the rough paths of those high, treacherous mountains with us throughout those four remarkably tragic years to predict or guess what would have happened to some, or even most of us. Yes, the past few years have put the long-held grudges and deep-seated resentments many of us hold against each and every one of our own compatriots in a bright light. In fact, the past three and half decades, but especially this brief four-year period, have shown us unmistakably that we have completely lost our direction with respect to finding a path to togetherness and unity.

The second major reason is that we have only been *talking*, often from a far distance, about the issues of our country and about the many common goals we want to develop and carry out. Regrettably and perhaps depressingly, we have never been willing, never been interested in actually translating this talk into practice. All of the talk and plans we have been engaged with throughout the past twenty-five or more years are not in any of our dossiers, not even on paper or in our computers. Why? Because the majority of us strongly believe that working for our common cause does not directly and immediately benefit us, for example by helping to support ourselves or our families at home. Yes, we are not also sure that working for a common cause would provide each and every of us with some kind of socio-political status. As a result, we choose to attack the TPLF leader, Meles Zenawi, and those around him only with modern technological products located thousands of kilometers away overseas, by means of our own individually owned radios, websites and other means of communication.

The oddest of all, which is actually tragic, is that we find it so easy to lie in our beds or sit on our chairs, accusing, charging Meles Zenawi and his cadres day in and out with being everything that one can imagine, rather than making peace with ourselves – with each other – and doing something

meaningful together, not for anyone else, but for ourselves, which would greatly boost our morale and our confidence. Instead, we feel weak, incapable and totally powerless to fight and resist our own backward personal and exceptionally detrimental cultural pride, which is firmly and irremovably attached to us, to all parts of our bodies. Our stubbornness limits and even totally blocks our capacity to think positively towards those with differing views – even to make a simple phone call to someone we feel may not like us, and talk to them with the pure intention of making peace, of being social, being friends with them by saying “I am sorry, dear! I think I probably, knowingly or unknowingly, have hurt your feelings. Can we please have a cup of coffee or tea together this afternoon, or tomorrow?” Yes, instead we choose, we prefer, to go on and on in endlessly fruitless talks, because it does not cost us anything, since we do our talks in our free time or while we are lying in bed. On the other hand, coming together face-to-face to fashion strategies aimed at building a community whose members are and remain loyal and respectful to each other, who work together to establish functional, helpful institutions with teaching/lecture and conference halls, professionally set up libraries/documentation centers, cafeteria spaces and recreation areas will require seriousness, responsibility, time, energy, and perhaps money as well from each and every one of us.

Perhaps (and to me, even certainly) these two reasons, as well as possibly a lack of clear understanding of what having our own collectively owned House could mean for our community, explain why we cannot feel jubilant and proud, and react enthusiastically to the idea of establishing our own Ethiopian Diaspora House – an institution that would allow the Ethiopian community to educate and train its own educators, diplomatic representatives and professional legal and organizational experts.

The vital importance of unity and confidence in allowing a community to win over its crisis and achieve its intended goals was more effectively and strongly articulated by the late president of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt, than by anyone else. He said briefly and so powerfully, "Confidence and courage are the essentials of success in carrying out our plan. Let us unite in banishing fear. We have provided the machinery to restore our financial system. It is up to you to support and make it work. It is your problem no less than it is mine. Together we cannot fail." It should be abundantly clear, in my irreversible view, that without courage and confidence we will not be able to make peace with one another; and without making peace with one another we will not have the confidence and courage to be able to build a functional Ethiopian Diaspora community. Without having the required confidence in each other, we will not be able to work closely together, and without working hand-in-glove, all of the efforts we have made from time to time, whether as individuals or in small groups, will be fruitless; they will even produce still more tension, anxiety, frustration and pain within the Ethiopian Diaspora community and for the people of Ethiopia at large. And we, as the Ethiopian Diaspora community, will continue to mature within our own family and group circles, dying as scattered and as hostile to each other as we are today, exactly as a sizable number of the “White Russian Refugees” of 1920 and 1940, who, due to their failure to agree and work together against the Bolsheviks who seized power during the October Russian Revolution of 1917, melted almost without a trace into the beautiful western mountains, into peaceful and relaxing rural landscapes and wealthy capitalist societies, to the point that no one today would notice either their origin or culture.

I have talked and presented papers related to the issues discussed here in various meetings and conferences, including Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan, in May 1997, in Washington DC in May 1997, in Los Angeles, California in July 1997, in Atlanta, Georgia in July 1998, in Leiden, The Netherlands in 1999, in Leuven, Belgium in March 2006, and in The Hague, The Netherlands in April and May 2007. Besides presenting papers and speaking at various gatherings and on media outlets, I have also been publishing articles related to the urgent need to make peace among ourselves, reviving our morale and confidence; and the important difference that establishing our own institutions could make to each and every of us as a proud and productive

community member. But in the final analysis it is “up to you to support and make it work. It is your problem no less than it is mine.”

Let me now conclude by quoting myself – something I usually don’t like to do, but the paragraph below seems to fit the issues highlighted above very well. “I would certainly not hesitate to point out that the ball has been and is still in our hands, in the hands of all Ethiopians; there is still the potential for us to make up our minds and come together in an effort to heal our deep-seated socio-political fractures and help redirect Ethiopia’s current position both in Ethiopia and within the international community. This seems, at least to me, a question of waiting to see what we want; whether we will be willing to come back to our senses and be prepared to restore, not just our feelings of Ethiopianess and belonging to one another, but also the shattered components of Ethiopia’s culture and the pride of its people. Again, it is my strong conviction that if we, collectively, are to play a meaningful role in helping to clear away the huge clouds surrounding our country and people, to create mechanisms conducive to moving our country from the status of a beggar society to one of self-reliance, this role will be conditioned by, and perhaps depend largely upon, our willingness to fight against the bad and ugly sides of our own culture – but also upon our readiness to engage in the cultivation and development of democratic institutions, confidence building, self-education and self-democratization efforts.” Maru Gubena, in “*Evaluating Three Decades of Ethiopian Resistance, its Challenges, Achievements and Failures: Perspectives for Political and Leadership Change*,” published June 2007.

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